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ABSTRACT

This autobiography relates the experiences of a young Ojibway boy who was taken from his family in 1939 at age 10 and placed in a Jesuit boarding school in northern Ontario, Canada. St. Peter Claver (later Garnier) or "Spanish," as the Indian school was known, was home to approximately 135 boys. Most of the students, who ranged in age from 4 to 16, came from broken homes; some were orphans; others were committed to the institution as punishment for some misdemeanor; and a few were enrolled by their parents in order to receive some education and training. Basil Johnston was sent to "Spanish" by the local Indian agent and priest after his parents separated. St. Peter Claver's was more than a school; it was a self-sufficient institution. The main building contained dormitories, classrooms, a study hall, a recreation hall, dining rooms, lavatories, a kitchen, chapels, a bakery, and a tailer shop. There was also a windmill, a power house, a shoe shop, a blacksmith shop, a garden, boats, and nearly 1,000 acres of land. Under the guidance of priests and brothers, the boys plowed; seeded and harvested potatoes, beans, and other produce; milled wheat and corn and baked bread; forged shoes and shod horses; and performed other work that kept the institution running. Their schedule included two periods of classroom learning a day. For the children's shelter, food, clothing, and education, the government paid 40 cents per student per day. The school existed to train Indian youth for a trade and to foster religious vocation through frequent prayer and worship. However, very few students went on to work in the trades or to become priests. Basil Johnston describes the vigorous work routine at the school, his learning experiences, and how he and the others at the school survived and coped with the alien setting of the boarding school. The book includes a glossary and lists of students attending in 1939. (LP)